

Review of Samantha Wolstencroft, The Progressive Alliance and the Rise of Labour, 1903-1922: Political Change in Industrial Britain (Cham, 2018).

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Samantha Wolstencroft, *The Progressive Alliance and the Rise of Labour, 1903-1922: Political Change in Industrial Britain* (Cham, 2018). ISBN 978-3-319-75744-5, £79.99 paperback.

'The dramatic eclipse of the Liberal party after 1918 and the seemingly meteoric rise of the Labour party are ... events which are difficult to explain, although not events which suffer from a want of explanations.'¹ So began Duncan Tanner's first article on the rise of the Labour Party in the early twentieth century. Since then, more than two generations of scholars have critically engaged with this complex debate, riddled with nuance and subtlety right down to views held in the most remote local party branch minute book. It is difficult to offer a new angle to this discussion, but Samantha Wolstencroft has managed it. This study carefully considers, through rigorous analysis of two case study settlements, the changing nature and development of the 'progressive alliance' between the Labour and Liberal parties. In doing so, Wolstencroft takes the neglected municipal and constituency politics of the leading industrial towns of Manchester and Stoke-on-Trent, and scrutinizes the strategic, organisational, and contextual nuances that help to explain the both socio-economic and political change. In doing so, the book also shows the significance of the local and regional in early twentieth-century Britain.

A thorough introduction places the book in wider context, clearly pulling apart the existing debate and simultaneously making a case for a renewed approach. The influence of Sam Davies is clear here, especially his arguments for greater engagement with municipal as well as constituency party material in explaining political change.² Likewise, Mike Savage's defence of local case studies has evidently influenced the study's methodology.³ Fundamentally, however, this is a study of the so-called 'progressive alliance' in British politics after 1903, and how its workings demonstrated the changing nature of British politics. As Wolstencroft points out, neither of these case study cities had received specific treatment, having only previously considered within regional studies of Lancashire and Staffordshire. As is often the case with such research, a change in perspective yields some interesting outcomes. In the chapters that follow, municipal contests, by-elections and general elections are used to pick apart Labour's developing strength in the case study areas, and the author seeks to evaluate what this tells us about localised political change. The coherence (or not) of the alliance is picked apart through rigorous analytical narrative and source engagement. From this, we can better understand the changing nature of the relationship between the Labour and Liberal parties.

As always, there are queries rather than criticisms. First, to what extent can a detailed focus on these two localities truly help us understand change across the nation. For example, Wolstencroft argues that four by-elections in these areas 'suggest the need for caution' (p.234) for the Clarke thesis of the increased popularity of 'new Liberalism' in 1908-1912. However, as practitioners of by-election studies have long suggested, we must be careful how much significance we ascribe to them as representative of contemporaneous changes or as gauges of opinion.⁴ Second, although the focus remains with the parties in the 'Progressive Alliance', it would be interesting to see whether consulting Conservative national, regional or local organisation minute books, especially when

¹ D.M. Tanner, 'The Parliamentary Electoral System, the 'Fourth' Reform Act and the Rise of Labour in England and Wales', *Historical Research* 56:134 (1983), pp. 205-219.

² R.S.W. Davies, *Liverpool Labour: Social and Political Influences on the Development of the Labour Party in Liverpool, 1900-1939* (Keele, 1996).

³ M. Savage, *The Dynamics of Working-class Politics: The Labour Movement in Preston, 1880-1940* (Cambridge, 1987).

⁴ D. Butler, 'By-elections and their interpretation', C. Cook and J. Ramsden (Eds.), *By-Elections In British Politics* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 5-6

discussing by-elections that have taken place in the case study towns. These officials and activists were usually shrewd observers of the political scene, and perhaps their perspective might have highlighted how the alliance's opponents viewed its operation, alongside its successes and failures. Finally, the localised focus seems to restrict the author from making firm conclusions (pp. 239-240). This is a shame, as the detail presented throughout the book presents a rather convincing case for it.

Overall, this is a valuable contribution to a still lively area of research. Wolstencroft's study adds another rich local angle to a debate often engaged in from various geographical, organisational, and socio-economic levels and perspectives, demonstrating there is further examination to undertake. There remain opportunities for scholars who wish to examine how and why this period allowed for Labour's supplanting of the Liberal party's role as opposition to political conservatism. After all, this was the only time in modern British political history that this happened. Arguably, this occurrence led some to see the UK's electoral system as more representative and flexible than previously assumed, especially for those (from Liberals to the National Front) who have sought to somehow replicate the manoeuvre. It is a process that will continue to fascinate and aggravate scholars in equal measure.

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